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C O N F I D E N T I A L CAIRO 003911

SIPDIS

NSC STAFF FOR POUNDS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/23/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: EGYPT: ARTICLE 76 REFERENDUM SPEEDING TOWARD ANTI-CLIMAX

REF: A. CAIRO 3785

[1](#)B. CAIRO 3755 (NOTAL)

[1](#)C. CAIRO 3495 (NOTAL)

[1](#)D. CAIRO 3424 (NOTAL)

Classified by Acting ECPO Counselor Al Magleby for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) The May 25 referendum on parliament's proposed amendment of Article 76 of the constitution, to allow for Egypt's first competitive presidential elections, is virtually certain to pass, although a low voter turnout is widely anticipated. A broad array of opponents have nonetheless called for a boycott of the referendum and even filed a long-shot petition with a court to freeze the polls on constitutional grounds. For its part, the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) has been working on a "get out the vote" campaign and slammed boycott proponents for "encouraging passivity and discouraging civic participation." End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) As reported reftels, an impressively broad array of opposition parties and other forces are calling for a boycott of the constitutional referendum, asserting that the proposal to amend Article 76 put forward by parliament, nominally intended to create a system of competitive presidential elections, will in fact exclude real competitors. (See reftels for analysis of the amendment and its implications.) Those calling for a boycott include the Wafd, Tagammu', Nasserist, and Ghad parties, each of which is currently seated in parliament, as well as the Kifaya protest movement, and the Muslim Brotherhood. The Wafd party's daily newspaper characterized May 25 (the date of the referendum) as a "day of national mourning" and urged readers to send "a clear and practical rejection of the ruling party's hoarding of all the keys to power in Egypt."

[1](#)3. (C) Opponents of the amendment (as proposed) had several reasons for settling on a boycott rather than attempting to organize a "no" campaign. First, they did not want to appear to oppose the principle of competitive presidential elections. Second, they feared that their participation would lend credibility to a virtually inevitable "yes" result. By calling for a boycott, opponents will be able to claim the probably inevitable low voter turnout (mainly due to voter apathy) as a vindication. Several opposition figures filed a petition with the State Council (court of first instance) to demand an injunction on the May 25 referendum, arguing that the question, as posed is unconstitutional because it does not provide the citizen with enough information about the proposal to make an educated decision. A court ruling was expected May 23 or 24.

[1](#)4. (C) For its part, the NDP used the opportunity of the May 18 meeting of the "National Dialogue" of political parties, to rally the nine (small and obscure) parties in attendance to join with it in rejecting calls for a boycott and calling on Egyptians to exercise their democratic right to vote. The May 18 National Dialogue took place in the absence of the most significant (if still marginal) opposition parties - the Wafd, the Tagammu', the Nasserists, and the Ghad, who announced they were withdrawing from the "charade" of the dialogue, hosted by the NDP, in protest of the "undemocratic" formula by which presidential candidates qualify (reftels).

[1](#)5. (SBU) NDP officials and precinct bosses have been engaged in the past ten days in a "get out the vote" campaign to encourage citizens to participate in the referendum "however you intend to vote." Pro-government commentators have criticized those calling for a boycott as advocates of negativity and passivity, and shirking their responsibility to encourage civic education.

[1](#)6. (C) Comment: Our best assessment is that the referendum will easily win approval, but voter turnout will likely be low - less because of calls for a boycott than because of the average Egyptian voter's apathy and/or cynicism toward electoral processes. End comment.

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GRAY